



Raccoon

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Raccoon

Procyon lotor

The mischievous little creature wearing the familiar black mask is the raccoon. These handsome mammals are highly intelligent and very playful. In folk stories, the raccoon often outwits humans or other animals. Its great adaptability has allowed it to flourish throughout our history and in almost all environments. So adaptable is it that the raccoon is among the most numerous of wild animals found in cities and other urban areas. There are few people who haven't surprised a raccoon on a nocturnal raid of their garbage cans.

Six raccoon species (possibly seven) are found in North, Central and South America. Our raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), which could be called the common raccoon is the only one found in North America, but it is also native to Central America and has been introduced in parts of Europe and Asia. North American raccoon relatives are the coati and the ringtail, both of which have banded tails.

Description

Raccoons are medium-sized mammals, the adults weighing between 8-20 pounds. Males usually weigh 10-15 percent more than females. The raccoon is easily recognized by its grayish brown fur coat, its distinctive black-ringed tail and mask-like black band around its eyes. Unlike many other animals with thick padded or hooved feet, the raccoon has a well-developed sense of touch that it uses during feeding.

History and Status

For many years the raccoon has been one of North Carolina's most economically important furbearers. Indeed, it is currently one of the most important animals in the U.S., generating more revenue than most other fur-bearing species. In North Carolina, raccoons are legally taken by both trapping and sport hunting, and management is directed toward sustaining statewide populations.

Habitat and Habits

Raccoons are most abundant in habitats associated with water, such as bottomland forests, hardwood swamps and marshes. Raccoons often occur in urban areas, where they can scavenge for food. Female raccoons generally prefer hollow trees as dens, but will choose a rocky ledge or empty burrow if needed.

One of the raccoon's most well-known habits is the way it seems to wash its food in water. Often the animal will idly scan the trees, the opposite bank or just stare blankly while its paws are busy under water. In actuality, dabbling at the water's edge is a common method raccoons use to locate and/or capture food.

The raccoon's great adaptability has allowed it to flourish ... in almost all environments.



Range and Distribution

Home ranges vary with respect to age, gender and habitat. Males generally have large home ranges that are smaller during the winter. Average home range varies from 99 to 247 acres and often follows a stream, river or swamp.

Raccoons range across the lower 48 continental states except for parts of the Rocky Mountains. In North Carolina they are found in all areas of the state but are most abundant in the Coastal and Piedmont regions.

Range Map



In North Carolina, the raccoon can be found statewide.

Raccoon

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Raccoons don't feed near water to wash this food; they go to the water to obtain food and use their dabbling method to find food.

Breeding seasons for North Carolina raccoons are from February through March in the Mountain Region and through April in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain. The gestation is about 63 days and 2-5 young are born from April through June in hollow trees or ground burrows. Young raccoons begin following their mother at 8-12 weeks of age, are dependent on her until they are at least 3½ months old, and leave her to establish their own home ranges at 9 months.

In colder regions, raccoons may enter a deep sleep during winter months, but they are not true hibernators, and, on mild days, they may rouse themselves from their sleep and search for food. Raccoons in North Carolina are more active than those to the north due to the warmer winters.

People Interactions



Human-related activities, such as hunting, trapping and automobiles, are the main causes of mortality in raccoons. Disease outbreaks, often associated with malnutrition and/or dense raccoon populations, also play an important role in controlling populations. Outbreaks of canine distemper and rabies are the most noted diseases.

While raccoons can contract rabies, interactions between people and non-habituated raccoons are uncommon. In suburban areas, it is common for raccoons to be seen in neighborhoods during the daytime; however daytime sightings of raccoons are not necessarily a sign that the animal is diseased.

Rather, raccoons are responding to the abundance of food available in these areas during the day and at night. Raccoons can become habituated to humans if easy access to unnatural foods exists. To avoid conflicts, people should keep their yards and neighborhoods clean of unnatural food sources such as dog food and unsecured garbage. While well-intentioned, people that feed feral cats will eventually attract raccoons and other wildlife.

A rabid raccoon can be characterized by aimless wandering, lethargy, uncoordinated movements, weakness in the hind legs, paralysis and loss of awareness. If you are concerned that a raccoon is sick or may be rabid, do not approach or attempt to capture the animal. Contact local health officials, who will determine if there is a threat and what measures should be taken.

Most people thoroughly enjoy their encounters with wildlife. By following suggestions found at the NCWRC Web site, www.ncwildlife.org, you, too, can enjoy raccoons and other urban animals.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 1½-3½ ft.

Height: 12 in. at the shoulder

Weight: 8-25 lbs.; average is 15 lbs.

Food

Wild berries and fruits, acorns and other nuts, vegetables from gardens, a variety of insects, frogs, fish, shellfish, small mice, occasional birds, and birds' eggs.

Breeding

Promiscuous: males may mate with more than one female. Breeding season usually begins in February and continues through June. Gestation period is 63 to 65 days.

Young

Called cubs. From 1 to 8 cubs, usually 2 or 3. Open their eyes at 19 days and stay with their mother for the first year. All cubs reach full sexual maturity in 2 years; however, females may mate at 10 months.

Life Expectancy

Up to 16 years in the wild, but most die within their first 2 years. Average lifespan is probably 2½ years.

NCWRC Interaction

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission biologists monitor trends in the raccoon population from several sources, including information on raccoon harvest, average pelt prices through licensed fur dealer reports, and annual mail surveys to licensed trappers. Another tool the NCWRC uses to monitor raccoon population trends is through surveys sent to established raccoon hunting clubs that participate in raccoon field trial events. These hunting clubs are surveyed to examine trends in hunting success by region, which is expressed in number of raccoons seen or treed per hour. From 1987 through 2007, raccoon hunting clubs have reported 16,450 field trial casts with 30,089 raccoons observed. Since 1987, the number of raccoons seen per hour has increased statewide, indicating an increasing raccoon population.



Q&A

1. Where in the world are raccoons found?

Raccoons are found in North, Central and South America and there are six raccoon species (possibly seven). Our raccoon, which can be called the common raccoon, is the only one found in North America.

2. Do raccoons really wash their food with water?

No. Raccoons dabble at the water's edge to locate and/or capture food.

3. If a raccoon is seen in the daylight does that mean it might have rabies?

Not necessarily. Raccoons will come out in the daytime when they are accustomed to people and unnatural food in their diet, such as dog food.

Link

To see a raccoon in the wild, go to

<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/player/animals/mammals-animals/other-mammals/raccoon.html>.

References

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Credits

Written by David Sawyer and Steve Popson. Updated by Colleen Olfenbittel, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, June 2009. Excerpt from *Wildlife in North Carolina*, "The Raccoon in your Yard" by Kate Pipkin.

Illustrated by J.T. Newman. Photos by Steve Maslowski.

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